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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Želinský, D. (2019). From Deduction to Abduction: Constructing a Coding Frame for Communist Secret Police Documents. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3377>

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From Deduction to Abduction: Constructing a Coding Frame for Communist Secret Police Documents

Dominik Želinský

Key words:

qualitative content
analysis;
deduction;
abduction;
historical
sociology;
communism;
secret police

Abstract: In this shop floor report I explore the process of constructing and reconstructing a coding frame for qualitative content analysis. Drawing on my research experience with the archives of the communist secret police, I highlight the advantages of employing controlled abductive reasoning in the process of coding frame construction and reconstruction. As I argue in the report, using abductive reasoning may help researchers to explore their data more fully, thus also facilitating a richer understanding of historical reality in social research. Importantly, with abductive reasoning theoretical innovation is also possible, because of the process of "defamiliarization" with data, and experimentation with various epistemological lenses to develop a new understanding of the phenomena in question.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, numerous researchers have become interested in qualitative content analysis (QCA), curiously, especially in the field of health and nursing studies (ELO & KYNGÄS, 2008; GRANEHEIM & LUNDMAN, 2004; SEVERINSSON, 2003). The main reason for the interest in QCA seems to be that with it, researchers can decipher deep, latent meaning structures (ERLINGSSON & BRYSEWICZ, 2017), and be relatively flexible in both their inductive and deductive coding frame construction compared, for example, to the structure of the grounded theory methodology (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). Yet, researchers working with QCA still encounter a number of problems and challenges (BAILEY & JACKSON, 2003). One of them is the place of this methodological approach in theoretically creative social research. Although it has been praised for allowing researchers to illuminate "the meaning of social reality or phenomena through verbal or written communications materials" (CHO & LEE, 2014, p.15), could QCA be a productive tool within the general framework of interpretive social research, and could it contribute to the development of new theoretical knowledge? Or is it true that it merely "*reduces* data" without "bringing it together in novel ways" (SCHREIER, 2012, p.7)? [1]

In this shop floor report, I argue that QCA may very well serve the role of an analytical method with which the structuring and consolidation of the researcher's historical imagination is enabled, and new theoretical insight may emerge. To be effective, however, in the process of QCA researchers must incorporate the impulse of abductive research logic. Abduction, introduced to the social sciences by Charles Sanders PEIRCE (1998 [1903]), refers to the controlled creative process that aims at identification and theoretical explanation of surprising phenomena encountered in the data (TAVORY & TIMMERMANS, 2014). It can be argued that abduction is a form of research logic, in which the advantages of both inductive and deductive approaches are combined as a result of a concrete theoretical vantage point, as well as an intimate connection between reasoning and specific data. [2]

2. Data Source

The empirical example for this report comes from my doctoral research focused on unofficial education in philosophy in communist Czechoslovakia. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, science and education in Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe were generally severely circumscribed by the communist party, which sought to influence both the intellectual agenda and staffing of educational institutions. Under these circumstances, intellectuals who wished, or were forced to remain independent from state-controlled research and education, organized unofficial, "parallel" study groups and lecture series for other members of dissent or general non-conformist networks. Since the late 1970s, dissident philosophers established connections with Western institutions, notably the philosophy faculty at the University of Oxford, which over the course of the next decade arranged dozens of lectures by prominent intellectuals such as Jacques DERRIDA, Jürgen HABERMAS, or Paul RICOEUR (DAY, 1999). [3]

The primary source of my research are the documents produced by the secret police, who, due to personal connections and frequent overlap between philosophy circles and dissident civil right activists, kept them under close scrutiny. This meant producing tens of thousands of pages of detailed ethnographic notes on their discussions, thoughts, activities, plans, and whereabouts. The data corpus I have assembled comprised a motley collection of documents—"reports" produced by the secret police officers (summaries from questioning of the police informants), but also their internal communication, their briefs and letters, questioning transcripts, as well as occasionally authentic materials produced by the philosophers themselves that the police confiscated (lecture texts or correspondence). I acquired these data, which after meticulous pre-selection comprised approx. 900 pages, from the digital collection of the Czech Archive of Security Forces. I conducted my analysis process using NVivo qualitative analysis software. [4]

The individual reports, which made up the vast majority of the documents that I researched, were generally succinct synopses of interviews or questionings of "sources" (both unwitting informants contacted by an undercover officer, or secret police agent). Occasionally, these reports were simply summaries of the current

state of the "object" of the police investigation, such as a rationale for why the person is under control, what is their background, primary contacts. Most often, however, these reports detailed an account of the most recent event in which the object was involved: a seminar, a discussion, a meeting, a trip. They contained information about those present, the content of what was said, and usually an evaluation of the possible danger for the socialist system as well as an outline of further action—for example, a plan to separate the individual from the general network, or defame them. [5]

3. The Problem with Deduction

I initially approached the process of constructing the coding frame, which "is at the heart of QCA" (SCHREIER, 2012, p.1), from the deductive perspective (ELO & KYNGÄS, 2008), drawing on ALEXANDER's theory of performance (2006) that formed the basis for my thesis. The goal was to explore the documents to understand how unofficial seminars were constituted as performative practices. The initial coding had six main categories, corresponding to the six "elements of performance" defined by ALEXANDER (2006): actor, audience, background representations, symbolic scripts, social power, mise-en-scène. Within each of these main categories, I specified several subcategories (ranging between three and seven), which pertained to specific, theoretically driven interests, such as the constitution of charisma process in the actor category. In sum, I created 36 categories, to comply with SCHREIER's (2012) advice to keep the frame from extending over 40 categories. [6]

When I began the exploration of my actual data, however, I soon discovered that the deductively constructed frame was not sufficient for the interpretive research that I had hoped for my study of unofficial seminars. In particular, I noticed that the performance-oriented coding frame, originally intended to be deliberately vague in order to produce rich results, in fact, captured very little of the meaningful content conveyed in the police materials. Although SCHREIER argues that qualitative content analysis is fundamentally reductive, it was obvious that I could possibly make much richer use of the data at hand. But the question was how to approach this problem within the bounds of a deductively developed coding frame, contingent on the structure of a particular theory. [7]

4. Abductive Approach

My solution was to abandon the strictures of the deductive logic in favor of an approach with which I could have creativity in frame re-construction, and possible theoretical innovation. Having searched for a different approach, I discovered a plausible alternative to the deductive coding frame development—abduction, sometimes referred to as "retroductive" (GRANEHEIM, LINDGREN & LUNDMAN, 2017, p.31) research logic. Researchers using an abductive approach to QCA draw on the insight of the pragmatist philosopher PEIRCE, who defined abduction as "the operation of adopting explanatory hypothesis" (1998 [1903], p.231) based on the surprise of "putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together" (1998, p.227). Recently, researchers in the social sciences became

interested in abduction, and recognized it as a fundamentally creative, fruitful alternative to the induction/deduction dichotomy (PADGETT, 2016; REICHERTZ, 2010; TAVORY & TIMMERMANS, 2014). In these recent works, it is the "speculative process of fitting unexpected or unusual findings into an interpretive framework" (TAVORY & TIMMERMANS, 2014, p.132), which "makes it possible to perceive connections on a deeper level and to penetrate beyond the apparent and reveal a richness of meaning" (ERIKSSON & LINSTROM, 1997, p.197). The researcher using abductive logic enjoys a structured elaboration for intuitive processes that shape scientific research, moving thus beyond the dated distinction between contexts of discovery and justification. [8]

To address the insufficiency of my coding frame, I drew on the recent work of TAVORY and TIMMERMANS (2014). Discussing the method of abductive discovery, the authors identified three key research movements: mnemonics (familiarization, immersion in the data), defamiliarization (creating productive distance between the researcher and the data), and revisiting observations (approaching observed phenomena in light of existing accounts). Since I was in the midst of the research process, I already felt adequately familiarized with my data, and therefore decided to fast-track, skip the initial step, and proceed straight to the movement of defamiliarization. [9]

Drawing on concepts from literary theory, in particular SHKLOVSKY's work on "ostranenie" (2016 [1917], p.76), TAVORY and TIMMERMANS (2014, p.63) define defamiliarization as a process that "takes an object that has all but ceased to offer resistance and problematizes its signification, turning it into a problem that requires a creative solution." By defamiliarization, "the automatic ways we make sense of the world become more fragile, and we find ourselves able to see problems where none seemed to have existed while we were in the field" (p.134). They suggest that the best path to defamiliarization is "meticulous note taking, memo writing, and transcription" (p.133). This careful recording should also be coupled with the changed theoretical (or generally epistemological) lens, which helps researchers distance themselves from their habitual patterns of thinking. [10]

5. Reconstructing the Frame

I therefore, randomly selected a portion of my data (60 pages out of the entire app. 900) and began the process of detailed re-reading of the material. In my practice, the advice for defamiliarization meant I took meticulous notes as extensively as possible—from simple records of the facts in police reports to preliminary construction of possible social networks and causal relationships of various strength. In line with the guidelines for abductive research offered by TAVORY and TIMMERMANS (2014), I soon identified a handful of phenomena which seemed to have the potential for productive reconstruction of my coding frame, and I began establishing hypotheses. [11]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these hypotheses proved unproductive. After I initiated the process of revisiting my observations, it soon became clear that most of them were singular occurrences without sufficient

impact, and sometimes my own mistaken interpretations. An important category related to phenomena that were epistemologically and theoretically not aligned with the performative theory within which I framed my research. [12]

Some observations were, however, meaningful. Specifically, the most noteworthy aspect that I identified in the course of revisiting the data was the following: a significant portion of the material, while relating to the unofficial seminars, did not fit my initial coding frame because it referred to different temporalities than the immediate seminar process. Such information was not only concerned with teaching performance, but also to various processes of seminar preparation or consequences. I suddenly became aware of time as particularly important for capturing the data hitherto escaping my coding frame, well-grounded in sociological theory (ABBOTT, 2016), and generally congruent with my performative framework. Situating the seminars in temporal "present," I decided to add two layers to my coding frame; the "pre-" processes that preceded it, and the "post-" results that followed the unofficial seminar. [13]

Adding these temporal dimensions allowed me to see processes that I originally considered irrelevant to my research, and integrate them into my coding frame. These were the seemingly insignificant processes such as characteristic endless debates about the meaning of political situations and possible further actions (often reported in great detail to the police by informers), laborious copying of documents, acquisition or assembling of technical gadgets (tapes, recorders, typewrites), book lending and copying, searching for spaces and concerns for security, etc., that were seen as fundamentally important in establishing ideational as well as material and spatial conditions for unofficial seminars. The processes of preparation, both direct and indirect, and pre-staging were not sufficiently captured by the original version of the performative theory I worked with, and my engagement with them opened up the possibility of theoretical innovation. [14]

After establishing the basis for the "pre-" processes, I began focusing on the frame of consequences, coding for results of interaction within unofficial seminars—literature circulation, the creation of friendships and solidarity, or interference of the police which, on occasion, stopped the seminars. Importantly, establishing an extra structure for the categories for these eventual processes also allowed me to begin linking new categories to hypothetical chains of path-dependency—potential causal links between particular temporal subcategories. [15]

In terms of theory development, the process of reconstructing my coding frame proved fruitful. I was able to then see one of the dominant performative frameworks by emphasizing the role of time, and causal links emerging between particular forms of preparation and its results. To uncover these, however, would be impossible had I not noticed the insufficient coverage of my initial coding frame, which prompted me to revisit the data. The logic of abductive inquiry, which sparked the idea to employ a new epistemological perspective, helped me to identify phenomena I had previously glossed over or ignored as irrelevant.

Through the abductive research process, however, they acquired new significance and swayed the course of my research. [16]

6. Conclusion

The use of abductive reasoning helped me to not only reconstruct my coding frame, but I also gained a deeper understanding of my data, unbound by the structure of the initial, deductive approach, and hence a better understanding of historical social reality through the medium of secret police documents. My subsequent exploration of the data through the performative lens, which is sensitive to processes of path-dependency and causality, further solidified my understanding of the past era. [17]

To summarize, I have described the potential benefits of applying abductive logic in the construction and reconstruction of a coding frame in qualitative content analysis in social research. While sometimes neglected as having quasi-quantitative, positivistic connotations, qualitative content analysis can be an effective tool that researchers can use to structure their focus in the analytical process, and consolidate their historical imagination. The process of coding frame development can become a theoretically creative pursuit when based on an abductive approach, which is designed—contrary to induction and deduction—to generate new insight through a structured, active search for new phenomena. [18]

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Citation

Želinský, Dominik (2019). From Deduction to Abduction: Constructing a Coding Frame for Communist Secret Police Documents [18 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(3), Art. 22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3377>.